

Laidlaw Scholars Program Research Proposal

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Cambodia's two most prominent museums are its National Museum, which houses art that represents Cambodia's rich cultural history, and the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, the former high-security prison where the Khmer Rouge detained and tortured at least 14,000 people between 1975 and 1979. The contrast between the two places is stark, yet they are also deeply connected: the Khmer Rouge, in their attempt to create an agrarian utopia in Cambodia, specifically targeted and killed anyone they deemed an intellectual, including scholars and monks. Many of the employees of the National Museum were killed, and the post-genocide revival of the museum was deeply affected by the new, tragic lack of intellectual expertise.

In my project, I aim to study how this lack of intellectual expertise impacted cultural revival in post-genocide Cambodia, particularly in relation to the institutions of monastic Buddhism and education. How does a country rekindle an intellectual and religious world that was deliberately suppressed, while it also recovers from a traumatic, devastating event? How was the genocide studied and recorded without the survival of so many scholars? These are questions I would like to research during my first summer.

In my second summer, I hope to travel to Cambodia to explore the country just four decades post-genocide. I plan on focusing my fieldwork in the capital, Phnom Penh, to explore how education and religion remain impacted in the present day by the effects of the genocide. I am interested in working with an organization that aims to combat the consequences of the lack of expertise, and Phnom Penh is the location of many, including the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), which works to record and archive the history of the genocide and promote healing and education. Though I do not speak Khmer, I would work to develop a rudimentary understanding of the language, and organizations like DC-Cam operate projects in English. Traveling to Cambodia would allow me to take my research beyond books and articles by interacting with Cambodian people and exploring Khmer culture.

In my senior year of high school, I pursued an extended research project focusing on how LGBT synagogues confronted the AIDS crisis, and what stood out to me most was how

culture was both preserved and adapted by communities and individuals working together in response to devastation. I think that my current project would explore similar ideas. In addition, I want to share my findings with the Columbia community because the United States has culpability in the Cambodian Genocide; it is vital for US-Americans to understand the United States' dangerous history of causing mass destruction and pain internationally.

I plan on majoring in history and religion at Columbia, and I am deeply captivated by people, particularly how individuals and societies remember and evolve. As the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, I feel particularly close to the horrors of genocide and systematic attempts to destroy cultural and religious tradition. I have also done extensive archival research with the Plain Sight Project, an undertaking of *The East Hampton Star*, which aims to uncover the names and stories of the enslaved people who lived on Long Island. Through this project, I became more interested in historiography, and I wish to better understand how I can work to oppose the skewed traditional historical narrative. All of these themes have led me to this research project. I was never taught about Cambodia in school, and I am excited to potentially have the chance both to explore a country that I have so much yet to learn about and to share my findings with my community here at Columbia.